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ABSTRACT

The term teacher-researcher refers specifically to public or private school teachers who instigate research in their own classrooms--working either alone, as part of a research team, or in conjunction with a professor. Teachers like these bring benefits to their colleagues and to their students, as well as to themselves. Their colleagues find it much easier to identify with the results of research that has been conducted down the hall, in an intact classroom, in a real school setting, than it is to accept and identify with the results of research conducted faraway, in a clinical setting by an unknown researcher. Students whose teachers are involved in research see their teacher as learner and the school as a place for learning. And, in turn, as teachers become learners they develop empathy for other learners, their students. Additionally, teacher-researchers in the classroom increase the knowledge base from which they work. Finally, conducting research provides teachers the opportunity to take some control of what is happening in their classroom, that is, they are acting rather than being acted upon. They become something other than consumers of educational dictums as they develop their own theories and test the hypotheses that support their theories. (NKA)

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THE EFFICACY OF TEACHER AS RESEARCHER: A TESTIMONIAL

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THE EFFICACY OF TEACHER AS RESEARCHER: A TESTIMONIAL

As I collected the questionnaires from the gifted students at my school, I said, "I promise that when I am a famous educational researcher, I will tell people that I got my start at this school, from you kids who were willing to fill out questionnaires, take tests, and have your answers to questions tape-recorded." The students cheered and applauded in the way that the young people at my school are prone to do when they are pleased or excited about something. It was not the first questionnaire that they had completed for me, and they realized that it probably would not be the last. The students have come to accept the idea of a teacher-researcher in their midst, and it seems to be a rewarding relationship for us both.

I have conducted research in my former elementary school concerning teachers writing with their students and its effects on the students' attitudes and interests in writing, and sentence-combining as it affects reading comprehension. At the high school for gifted students where I presently teach, I have investigated the reading needs of secondary gifted students and verbally gifted students' fluent production of humor. I have been the sole researcher on all of these projects, but next year,

a professor and I will be doing joint research concerning gifted students' response to high fantasy literature.

For the purposes of this article, the term *teacher-researcher* refers specifically to public or private school teachers who instigate research in their own classrooms or schools. The teachers may be working alone, as part of a research team, or in conjunction with a professor at a university. The term does not refer to teachers who have been chosen or who have volunteered to allow researchers in their classrooms. The teacher-researcher is at least partially, if not 100% responsible for the idea for the research and for conducting the research in his/her classroom or school.

Teachers conducting research in their own classrooms is efficacious because of its effects on three subgroups of the educational community: (1) the teacher-researchers; (2) the colleagues of the teacher-researchers; and (3) the students of the teacher-researchers. Members of the subgroups benefit for different reasons and in different ways, and the purpose of this article is to highlight those benefits so that other teachers will begin to do research in their classrooms.

Teacher-Researchers

Conducting research in one's own classroom directly benefits the teacher-researcher. When I am involved in a

research project, I feel more involved and excited about teaching. I have an anticipatory feeling each day as I wonder about the effects of a "treatment" (e.g. writing with my students) or as I wonder what the results of a survey or test will indicate--will they support my hypotheses or will they direct me on a different path?

This questioning stance is both an indirect result and cause of conducting research. In order to conceive of a research project, the teacher must first be curious about some phenomenon concerning children or learning. As the research project is instigated and begins to progress, the teacher-researcher's curiosity is stimulated further. This inquisitiveness leads the teacher-researcher to look for--and find--answers to the questions that have been raised. The teacher-researcher's "search and discovery mission" allows for his/her knowledge base to be both broadened and strengthened.

The teacher-researchers' expanded knowledge increases their effectiveness and therefore, their self-concept as teachers. Teachers who are self-confident are better able to effectively deal with the questions of parents, administrators, and other members of the community. Many lay people are intrigued with the idea that a teacher is actually doing *research* in the classroom. For example, when people ask me what I do, I often tell them that I am a classroom teacher and a researcher. Hearing *teacher*

and *researcher* used to refer to the same person is usually enough to pique their interest. In such situations, the teacher-researchers are able to speak with authority and pride about their projects and accomplishments, with research data to support them. This enhances the status of these individual teachers and the status of educators in general, in the eyes of the listeners.

Most people are in awe of research and anything remotely associated with it. Virtually all teachers and administrators are not only unacquainted with educational research, but are afraid of it. It seems too intangible for most educators to relate to--so it is therefore ignored, or even shunned by the people who could make the best use of it. But, teachers doing research at the local level can help change that attitude. As teachers become engaged in the research process, they develop a comaraderie with other researchers and research no longer seems so ethereal.

Colleagues

As classroom teachers develop and carry out research projects in their classrooms, not only will they begin to see research as something useful and tangible, but so too will the faculty members around them. It is much easier to identify with the results of research which has been conducted down the hall, in an intact classroom, in a real school setting, than it is to accept and identify

with the results of research conducted faraway, in a clinical setting, by an unknown researcher (who possibly inhabits an ivory tower).

When teachers conceive and direct research projects, they should be encouraged to share the processes and the results with teachers in other schools in their district. Workshops presented by in-service practioners hold much more credibility for teachers and have much better chances of making a difference in their teaching than do workshops presented by administrators or professors. Right or wrong, this attitude can be attributed to the belief held by many teachers: members of the aforementioned groups are too far removed from the real educational situation to know what is occurring and cannot therefore, make legitimate, viable suggestions for teaching. And, it is possible that teachers will respond more favorably and will react more propitiously to suggestions to modify their teaching, if the suggestions are based on classroom research, carried out by frontline teachers.

Also, one hopes that as teachers observe their contemporary conducting research and being rejuvenated by the experience, they will want to join in. Not all teachers will; they should not be expected to, nor is it necessarily desirable for every teacher in every building to be a researcher, but some will. One or more teacher-researchers in a building add vitality to a

staff and to the atmosphere of the school.

Students

Students are the final subgroup of the educational community which are affected directly by the teacher-researcher. Students whose teachers are involved in research are able to observe an adult in active pursuit of answers. Instead of just hearing exhortations to be active learners (seeking knowledge, digging for answers, etc.), the students have that process modelled for them by their teacher. This helps young people see their teacher as a learner and the school as a place for learning. One of my students told me that seeing me do research helped her see that I was interested in more than just coming to school to teach--I also wanted to learn. Another student said that it made him feel like I was really interested in the students and how to make learning better for them.

As teachers become learners, they develop empathy for other learners. Students benefit from this empathy because, oftentimes, teachers have forgotten what it was like to be a learner (e.g. the frustration that comes from the inability to discover an answer no matter how hard one tries). This empathy aids the teacher-researcher-learners as they deal with students during their learning process.

The third beneficial effect that students receive by having teacher-researchers in the classroom is the increased knowledge base from which those teachers work. No teacher can know everything, but a teacher who keeps up with the professional literature is certainly better equipped with knowledge and enthusiasm than the complacent teacher who has not read a professional book or article in years.

Although teacher-researchers are not a panacea for the ills of education, they are certainly one viable treatment. Conducting research provides teachers the opportunity to take some control of what is happening in their classrooms, i.e. they are acting rather than being acted upon. They become something other than passive consumers of educational dictums (Common 1983) as they develop their own theories and test the hypotheses which support their theories.

Elliot W. Eisner, former vice-president of the American Educational Research Association, believes that "those engaged in educational research should have an intimate acquaintance with life in classrooms" (1984, pp. 450). Classroom teachers are much better able to put into perspective what is actually occurring in the classrooms they inhabit than they are often given credit for. I do not recommend that all educational research be conducted in intact classrooms by teachers, but I do propose

more such "action" research be encouraged--especially as opposed to the research that involves what Eisner (1984, 451) calls "educational commando raids to get the data and to get out." Being a teacher-researcher has a positive impact on colleagues, (who appreciate the boost), students (who are the raison d'etre for teachers), and the researchers themselves. There are too many advantages embodied in the manifestation of the concept of the teacher as researcher to let it lie fallow. Teachers should go ahead and test those ideas they have always wondered about. Many will reap the benefits of their efforts!

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